Lesson 1: Religious and Cultural Communities as a Cornerstone of the Whole Community

Welcome!

In 2011, as FEMA Administrator, W. Craig Fugate began to promulgate the Whole Community Concept. Based on this concept, he stated that "When a disaster strikes, the initial services provided may not come from government, but rather from churches, synagogues, mosques and other faith-based and community organizations."
"Improving the Nation's Response to Catastrophic Disasters: How to Minimize Costs and Streamline our Emergency Management Programs" – W. Craig Fugate, March 30, 2011.

Based on the idea that religious and cultural communities are part of the Whole Community, the **DHS Center for Faith-based & Neighborhood Partnerships** works to form partnerships between the Federal Government and faith-based and neighborhood organizations to more effectively serve Americans in need.

As part of this effort, this course has been developed to provide emergency management professionals and faith and community leaders active in disaster with the literacy and competency tools needed to effectively engage religious and cultural groups both pre- and post-disaster.

Please note that the information in this course is not intended to be an exhaustive review of all religious and cultural issues. With this in mind, we are exploring ways to provide periodic updates as appropriate.

Course Goals

The goals of this course are to:

- Provide students with an understanding of the unique needs and strengths of diverse religious and cultural groups in disaster
- Give the student an understanding of how to best leverage strengths and support needs of such groups in disaster operations
- Provide specific training on how to effectively integrate such groups in disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation

Course Objectives

Upon completion of this course, participants will be able to:

- Explain why we engage religious and cultural communities in disaster, and how religious and cultural diversity and practice is not only protected by law but how it strengthens emergency management's capabilities.
- Define the meaning of religious and cultural literacy and competency in disaster management
- Describe how religious and cultural language differs from government culture and language.
- Identify the skills needed to competently engage religious and cultural leaders and groups in the field.
- Describe each step in the six step "LEADER" process.

Lesson Overview

This lesson provides an introduction to the Whole Community concept, the policy and directives associated with diversity, and how diversity strengthens emergency management's capabilities.

Upon completion of this lesson, you should be able to:

- Describe how religious and cultural communities are a vital part of "whole communities" and why community engagement is essential in disaster response.
- Identify and explain the assets faith and cultural communities bring to the whole community.

Whole Community

Every facet of society must be involved in preparing for, protecting against, responding to, recovering from, and mitigating any and all disasters. The Federal Government is only one part of this overall society.

This **whole community** approach to emergency management ensures that solutions that serve the entire community are implemented, while also making sure that all the resources the different members of the community bring to the table are leveraged. This includes those in State and local governments, Tribal governments, faith-based groups, and other non-governmental and private-sector organizations.

Faith Communities as Part of the Whole Community

The whole community includes not only secular and civic organizations, but also the different religious and cultural groups that are present throughout the United States. To be effective, emergency management personnel must be aware of the different religious and cultural groups they may encounter during a given engagement. Ignoring these religious and cultural institutions not only excludes valuable individuals, but also the vast networks and resources these groups have created – networks and resources that go beyond geographical boundaries. Including these networks greatly increases the resilience created by the whole community approach.

It should be noted that as we discuss the different religious and cultural communities that are included in the whole community, we are neither endorsing a particular set of religious beliefs or practices, nor suggesting that government prioritize faith communities over secular communities and organizations.

This course is intended to increase the field of skills of emergency management personnel when engaging with a segment of the American public that identifies with a particular religion or culture.

As you learn more about these communities, you'll find that religious identity and culture are often tightly interconnected. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish something that is purely cultural from something that is purely religious. As such, understanding these faith and cultural communities, their institutions, and cultural norms is essential for working competently and effectively in a disaster-impacted community.

Assets of Faith Communities in Disaster

Now that we understand the role of faith communities, we can begin to look at the assets these communities bring to the whole community.

Mission to Serve

Faith communities bring the compassion to help people cope and recover.

Trust

Faith communities bring a level of trust to those within the community. This includes the moral authority and legitimacy brought by its leaders, as well as the mission to serve that may be included in its doctrine. It is important to note that moral authority may work both positively and negatively. For example, during Hurricane Katrina, a pastor in Mississippi told congregants that if they followed evacuation orders, then they did not have faith in Jesus.

Resources

Faith communities bring significant resources that may be used during disasters. This includes space, people, money, capacities, and national affiliates.

Knowledge

Faith communities may best understand the needs and desires of those affiliated with the community. Moreover, they are likely the best to communicate with these individuals as they share the same language and culture.

Networks

Communication through the faith communities may extend nationally as they can often reach beyond their congregations into larger geographical areas.

Programs

Faith communities typically already have programs in place to help those in the community, including humanitarian services and disaster volunteers.

Presence and Staying Power

Faith communities typically have longevity in a particular area and will want to see any disaster recovery efforts through until the end.

Perhaps the role of faith communities during and after a disaster was best described by Amy Worden, who wrote:

"From tiny storefront congregations to deep-pocketed denominations, the communities of faith arrived first. In the harrowing hours and days after Hurricane Katrina, when survivors roamed the desolate streets in search of water, food and medicine, church groups…provided dazed residents with their first hot meal, their first clean water, their first aspirin."

FAITH IN ACTION Faith-based groups early and enduring Before agencies aided Katrina's victims, religious groups did - and still do.- Amy Worden, Philadelphia Inquirer, August 23, 2006

Lesson Summary

This lesson provided an introduction to the Whole Community concept, the policy and directives associated with diversity, and how diversity strengthens FEMA's capabilities.

You should now be able to:

- Describe how religious and cultural communities are a vital part of "whole communities" and why community engagement is essential in disaster response.
- Identify and explain the assets faith and cultural communities bring to the whole community.